

America's Signs & Symbols

Promoting Patriotism

Overview: After completing this activity, students will better understand the power of visual symbolism to call citizens to action during periods of national strife.

Age Group/Grade Level: 14-17 years, grades 9-12

Subject Area: Visual Arts, History

Duration: approximately 75 min.

Background

During WWI, the Committee on Public Information's Division of Pictorial Publicity issued a call to action, and American artists responded by designing hundreds of posters. The posters urged citizens to buy liberty bonds, which would broaden support for America's involvement in the war and help fund the war effort. Poster campaigns such as this one appealed to patriotic beliefs in order to unite the country behind a common cause—especially challenging during WWI, as many Americans were noninterventionist and did not want the United States to enter the war.

Artist Joseph Pennell's poster depicted a near impossibility: enemy war planes could not yet traverse the Atlantic. Nonetheless, his nightmarish vision of an attack on New York City was disseminated widely. Nearly two million copies called on Americans to contribute to the war in Europe by buying liberty bonds at home. At a time when the average American's annual household income was just \$1,518, the purchase of more than \$23 billion in liberty bonds helped pay for WWI.

Discussion

Share just the image, without text, from Joseph Pennell's *That Liberty Shall Not Perish from the Earth...*. Open discussion by posing the following questions:

- If this were part of a newspaper, what headline would accompany this image?
- Who are the aggressors, based solely on what you see? What meaning might the destruction of the Statue of Liberty hold for them?

Explain that this image is part of a poster created to support the war effort during WWI. Initially, Americans were wary of entering the Great War, and a first step toward involvement was winning their support of the Allies, both in money and [matériel](#). In his address to Congress in 1917, President Woodrow Wilson cited, among other provocations, Germany's attacks on nonmilitary ships and its attempted alliance with Mexico against the United States as reasons to go further.



Joseph Pennell, [That Liberty Shall Not Perish from the Earth, Buy Liberty Bonds](#), ca. 1917, lithograph on paper, sheet and image: 40 3/4 x 28 1/4 in., Gift of Barry and Melissa Vilkin, 1995.84.57.

In 1917, Congress voted to declare war on Germany and Austria-Hungary. This poster was produced that same year.

- How does this image fit within the events of the time?
- What meaning might the destruction of the Statue of Liberty hold for New Yorkers? American servicemen? Tax-payers on the home front?
- What might be the purpose of such an image?

Next, share the whole artwork, including the written words.

- Toward whom is this written message directed? What actions is this audience being urged to take?
- How do the image and the words work together? Is one without the other more or less powerful?

Share the fact that in 1917, enemy planes were not yet capable of the long-range flight necessary to bomb New York City.

- Why might the artist have chosen to depict this fictional scene?
- The artist was urging Americans to help sponsor the war by purchasing liberty bonds. Was the Statue of Liberty the most effective symbol to incorporate into this message? Why or why not?

For a full-size image of Joseph Pennell's *That Liberty Shall Not Perish from the Earth, Buy Liberty Bonds*, visit:

https://ids.si.edu/ids/deliveryService?id=SAAM-1995.84.57_1

Activity

Assign artworks from the WWI period and immediately after, such as those on the right, for students to research in small groups. For each work, have them assess the origin, purpose, value, and limitation of each work using the questions below as guides:

- Who created this piece?
- When was it created?
- What purpose does/did this piece serve?
- Who is/was the intended audience?
- What can we tell about the creator from this piece?
- What can we tell about the audience from this piece?
- What part of the story can we not tell from this piece?

Introduce a basic definition of propaganda and ask students to sort the artworks researched by the class into those they believe to be propaganda or not. After having small groups report on how they categorized the artworks, identify those works that fell into both categories. Have students debate their position on these “dual-category” works, providing visual evidence from the artworks as justification for their chosen category.

Collectively develop a set of criteria for what makes an artwork “propagandistic” and have students apply these criteria to artworks, advertisements, or other visual media from a variety of time periods.



James Montgomery Flagg, [I Want You for U.S. Army](#), 1917, chromolithograph on paper, sheet and image: 39 1/2 x 29 in., Gift of Barry and Melissa Vilkin, 1995.84.53.



Helen Hyde, [Her Bit \(War Time\)](#), 1918, color etching, 7 x 5 in., Gift of Chicago Society of Etchers, 1935.13.164.

For a full-size image of James Montgomery Flagg’s *I Want You for U.S. Army*, visit: https://ids.si.edu/ids/deliveryService?id=SAAM-1995.84.53_1

For a full-size image of Helen Hyde’s *Her Bit (War Time)*, visit: https://ids.si.edu/ids/deliveryService?id=SAAM-1935.13.164_1

For a full-size image of Paul Manship’s *Defense of Verdun Medal*, visit: https://ids.si.edu/ids/deliveryService?id=SAAM-1965.16.88A-B_1



Paul Manship, [Defense of Verdun Medal](#) (front and reverse), 1920, bronze, 4 in. diam., Gift of the artist, 1965.16.88.